

Container Gardening : A Beginner's Guide to Successful

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CONTAINER GARDENING

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Introduction

Some things truly never change. While growing up, we heard our parents constantly preaching to us about eating our fruits and vegetables. As adults, we thought we were rid of those annoying lectures. We never dreamed the responsibility of lecturing us on this importance of these foods was subsequently turned over to our doctor. After decades of having this thought drilled into our heads, we should have realized by now that maybe, just maybe, they knew what they were talking about.

Still, with today's hectic schedules being crammed with more activities than ever before, it remains next to impossible to have enough of the good stuff on hand as well as the time to convert it all over to a well-balanced diet. While nothing can be done to slow down the sands of time, there is plenty that can be done about making fruits and vegetables readily available to us.

If we have our own garden, it only stands to reason that we would be more likely to consume those foods, right? But there are some major problems that many want-to-be gardeners face.

One: lack of space.

Two: the know-how to till and prepare the soil for a garden.

Three: the equipment to make it all come together.

The solution? Container gardening.

If you are like most novice gardeners, you will likely cringe at having the fate of plants in your hands. But container gardening is different. With so much of the process carefully controlled, you can grow your own food and have fun doing it.

Even if you have a history of killing every plant in your home except those made out of plastic, you can be successful with container gardening.

Why go to all of the trouble when you can visit your supermarket and pick up anything you want? Because there are many advantages to growing your own food.

Benefits of Growing Your Own Food

Some people might be skeptical at the thought of growing their own food. Don't let the thought of being responsible for supplying many of your own vegetables sway your decision. This is actually a good thing. Once you recognize the many benefits that having your own garden has to offer, you will be on board.

Despite what you may believe, gardening is not that hard. Yes, it requires a certain measure of your time and a few resources, but in the end, what you reap will more than pay you back for what time and energy you have invested.

Consider the benefits that can be derived from having your own private garden:

You save money. Take a stroll through the produce section of your local supermarket and you will feel the financial pinch of the rising price of groceries. Most items fluctuate greatly depending on weather conditions, transportation costs, handling expenses, labor issues, foreign policy, etc. Face it: food prices are out of control.

Growing your own vegetables eliminates having the price of your food dictated to you by others. It gives you control over what you spend and keeps your grocery bill considerably lower.

History. Food bought in a supermarket generally comes with some designation of where it was grown. Other than that, you have no idea of the conditions behind the product. Other countries might be well-known for their fruits and vegetables, but you cannot be sure of the conditions in which they were harvested, packed and shipped. Foreign countries do not always have the best health guidelines when it pertains to food.

Poisons. Chances are you can almost bet that your supermarket food was sprayed with some type, or types, of chemicals and pesticides. But what kind and how often? You will never know.

Quality. Food grown by you will taste better because it has not been subjected to genetic alterations. It has not been changed in any way, which not only affects its quality and how it reacts to your body, but

also the way it tastes, too.

Why Use Containers?

There are many advantages of using container gardening over conventional gardening. The most obvious reason is people simply won't go to the trouble to do all of the work associated with a conventional garden. Therefore, they make the choice of living without a garden, leaving the fate of their food up to their local supermarket.

Another reason for choosing the container gardening route is anyone can do it. They require a very minimum amount of space so it doesn't matter if you live in an apartment, a condo or even a house with a limited yard. Container gardens can adapt to fit any amount of space that you have available.

Besides convenience, container gardens offer many other benefits over conventional gardening:

- You do not have to worry about such important issues as too much shade. You can place your containers exactly where they need to be in order to thrive. If your first location turns out to be less than adequate, simply move them to a more ideal spot.
- Since you pick the soil, it is always the right balance of nutrients. No more worrying about what your soil contains and what needs to be added in order to balance it. Soil can be purchased to your exact specifications.
- You do not need special equipment. Aside from a few simple tools, container gardening requires very little in the way of materials.
- You do not need a lot of space. Container gardening allows for compact gardening. One established tomato plant, for example, can produce enough tomatoes for an average family. One container usually means that the needs of one food product have been met.
- Convenience of location. Container gardening is a wonderful option because it can literally be accomplished anywhere. You can have a garden on your patio, on a deck, on your porch or your sidewalk. An advantage of using containers is that it doesn't even require a yard. If you live in an apartment, townhouse or condo, you can use your balcony or, if it applies, a rooftop.

- You do not need a farming background. Container gardening requires no special experience, no horticulture background and no formal training. Literally anyone can do it and be successful.

A Couple of Things to Remember

Containers are simple for gardening, but they still come with a few rules:

1. Drainage holes. No matter what size container you use, it has to have drainage holes. This prevents unnecessary moisture from building up in the bottom of the plant and encouraging mold or a rotting of the root system. Having proper drainage also encourages good root growth, which translates into a healthier plant. By preventing excess water from congregating around the root system, you allow oxygen to make its way in, supplying the plant with much-needed air.

But be careful: while you want adequate drainage for the plant, you also don't want to allow a large majority of its water supply to run right through the container and out the bottom without the plant having sufficient access to it.

2. Match the size. Know in advance what you are going to be planting and then go out and buy the appropriate containers to house them. This means having a working knowledge of just how large your plants can become. The last thing you want is to find that your plant has out-grown its container and needs to be re-potted. This puts a lot of stress on the plant. Plants don't like stress, so if you can keep stress to a minimum, your plants will thank you for it.

3. Looks. You will be required to look at your containers for months on end. Make sure that your choices of containers are appealing and something that you can bear to stare at while they are being put to use.

Inside or Outside?

Another important choice that you will have to make is whether you want to locate your container garden inside your home or outside. There are both good and bad points for each, so it comes down to your particular situation, the size of your garden, your setup, your schedule, your growing conditions and other factors.

Inside- Pros:

Pests. Growing your plants inside allows you to virtually eliminate any possibility of pests or insects. While a small few might trickle in when an adjacent door is left open, they will be minuscule at best. This means that you can almost be certain to not have to treat marauding insects.

Animals. Believe it or not, depending on where you live, there are going to be other culprits besides insects that want to attack your garden. One is birds. Birds love plants, especially certain fruits, and will go out of their way to acquire a taste. If you live in a more rural area, you could have to contend with squirrels, chipmunks, mice, rats and the likes. Dogs and cats will also nose around your plants, with larger male dogs being tempted to relieve themselves on your plants, if they are convenient enough for them to mark their territory on.

Protection. If you keep your containers inside, you can offer them protection from inclement weather conditions. Hail, heavy rain, ice and even frost can wipe out your garden in one instance. Of course, your plants can still be moved inside in the event of bad weather, assuming that you have enough room set aside and that you are home and available to do so if the need arises.

Inside- Cons:

Sunlight. Each type of plant requires a certain amount of direct sunlight in order to thrive. If they do not receive what they need, the plant, and what it has to bear, will suffer. Not enough sun and the plant limits its growth and output. Too much sun and the plant withers and browns, also limiting its output.

Plants are classified according to the amount of sun they need, whether they are a shady plant, one that does well in partial sun or one that requires full sun. Growing your plants indoors can greatly limit what you can produce.

On the other hand, if you have the ideal setup, you can focus your attention on ensuring that your plants receive exactly what they need, when they need it. This requires extra effort on your part, but if you prefer to have your containers inside, then it is the added

responsibility you agree to take on.

When the plant receives sun is another reason why location within the home is crucial. The time of day sunlight is allowed to enter also has a lot to do with being prosperous. Depending on which direction the sun is allowed to coat the containers will determine how much of it they will receive.

For example, if plants are facing a Southern exposure to sunlight, they will be guaranteed the longest amount of exposure in a day. Likewise, a Northern exposure means the plants will be shielded most of the day. If you aren't sure of the location, log the amount of sunlight that filters in over a couple of days and judge whether it will be an ideal location for what your containers will need.

Pollination. Some plants require pollination or cross-pollination to thrive. While these are usually your fruit-bearing trees, some bushes also require it. Moving them indoors takes this necessity away from them.

Glass. Moving a garden indoors might protect it from the climate and offer it substantial sunlight, but you also have to keep in mind that glass can heat things up in a hurry. Place your hand next to a window or door on a hot summer day and feel the radiant heat it produces. While the temperature of the room might be comfortable, the radiant heat can quickly dry out plants more than you might have anticipated.

But being outside doesn't necessarily eliminate this threat. Heat can be reflected off a number of surfaces including siding, glass, rooftops (if you are using the rooftop to house your containers), concrete sidewalks, wooden decks and even the water in a pool. If a surface is so bright that it is hard to look at in direct sun, you can almost be positive it is producing radiant heat.

Outside- Pros:

The biggest advantage to growing container gardens outside is freedom. Freedom from having to worry about your plants not getting enough sun, freedom from the consequences of over-watering and runoff, freedom from residue left behind on floors from containers, etc.

Growing outside also allows you to take advantage of rainfall and

other precipitation, such as dew. If you are really a “green-thinking” person and catch rainwater in a rain barrel, it makes watering your plants much easier if they are close by.

Being outside also allows proper pollination. Having several varieties of a plant means the plants can be cross-pollinated, making the plant happier and giving you a greater bounty of food. You will want to check ahead of time to see if cross-pollination is important to the particular plants that you will be growing.

Outside- Cons:

One force that is often overlooked is wind damage. It can inflict heavy damage and even destroy a container garden in one incident. You have to be able to position your containers in a location that allows enough sun and access to precipitation while providing sufficient protection from the wind.

Wind can not only toss your smaller plants around, but the effects of wind can quickly dry out a plant much easier than you would imagine. Even though you may have watered your plants at the correct intervals, wind can accelerate the drying out of roots, putting your plants under unnecessary stress.

Terrain. If you are not blessed with a level yard for your containers, consider how much a slope can affect your plants. Not only can plants be subjected to multiple degrees of difference due to slope, but you also have to contend with the effects of water running down a hill in heavy rains, wind accelerating down a hill and even items being tossed down a hill during a storm. Remember this when placing plants in the low spot of a yard.

How to Get Your Container Garden Started

1. Types of Containers

It is a good idea to put some thought into what type containers you want to use. If you are on a tight budget, you might be tempted to go with the cheapest you are able to locate at your neighborhood retail center. While these will still work, they are not the ideal choice.

By far, the most popular choice for containers is plastic. They're inexpensive, lightweight, durable and fashionable since they come in a wide array of colors and styles.

Some people choose more porous materials for their containers. The good news is that their porosity allows air to enter and exit the root system, giving a higher percentage of oxygen than standard containers. The bad news is that this air movement also means that the dirt dries out faster, requiring more diligent watering.

Then there is the old reliable choice: clay pots. Many find these appealing because they are relatively lightweight for their size and they can withstand a lot of use. They also allow the artist in you to paint them to match your style, if you so desire. They even come with a drain hole built right in. Their only down side is they are not meant for the cold. If moisture is left in them, even wet dirt, the expansion from the low temperatures will crack them.

But there are some things to watch out for. While the list of features given above can sound rather appealing, it can also be your undoing.

Price. There is inexpensive and then there is cheap. The difference might not be substantial considering the fact that we're talking about plastic, but the end result can be huge. Inexpensive means that it fits your budget. Cheap means it won't last and you'll end up replacing it too early, thus negating the original savings that you pocketed. Don't always go with the lowest price; also consider quality and durability.

Durability. This goes right along with price as you get what you pay for. It might be lightweight, but it also has to last and handle the load of the plant. If you have to move a container and it buckles from the

load, you risk losing your plant.

Something else to consider is that you might have to move the container at some point. So make sure that what you pick is durable enough to withstand the move. Even if it manages being moved, it also needs to be easy to hold onto. A flimsy container that easily buckles might not crack or break when picked up, but its shape can be distorted from the weight, making it rather difficult to juggle until you can get it to its new location.

Your containers need to be able to handle what the weather can dish out—especially a blazing sun for long periods of time. Cheap, lightweight plastic containers will crack after just a short amount of exposure to the blistering sun. Once a small crack forms, it won't take long for it to devour the container.

If you are sold on using plastic, the best advice would be to go with plastic containers that are double-walled. This provides more protection and durability for the money. Plus, the additional layer of plastic walling allows the heat from the sun to dissipate more instead of heating up the dirt surrounding your plant. This means your plant has less of a chance of drying out before you water it again.

Drainage. Some plastic containers are manufactured without a drainage hole. This leaves the responsibility of providing one for your plants up to you. In order to do this, you will need to utilize a power drill and drill a reasonably sized hole in the middle of the bottom of the container.

Some people prefer to drill numerous smaller holes instead of one large hole. While this is fine, it can produce more drainage than you anticipate. Once the holes are there, you are committed to using them. Keeping one large hole is easier to manage in the event that the loss of water needs to be better controlled.

If the container is quite large, it may be necessary to drill several large holes to adequately drain the plant considering the increased surface area.

If you purchase containers that have pre-drilled drainage holes in them, there will be times when these holes are too large, allowing not only too much water to escape but also dirt, as well. The best way to remedy this is to use a drainage screen.

Drainage screens are pieces of mesh that more than cover the diameter of the drainage hole, while still allowing excess moisture to be released. Drainage screens can be purchased pre-cut or you can buy a section of the screening and custom make your own pieces. The screening is inexpensive and saves you a lot of heartache from lost soil. If you can't find drainage screening in your local store or if you don't have the opportunity to shop for it, then a piece of an old window screen will work nicely.

Pre-owned. It is also common for new gardeners to pick up used pots from a number of sources, such as friends, family, other gardeners, yard sales, etc. These are still fine to use as long as you exercise a little caution. Make sure to thoroughly clean all containers with warm soapy water before use as they could be harboring some unpleasantness that you won't want to bring into your container garden.

Since you don't know the history behind the container or what was placed in it, it is better to be safe than sorry. Old dirt can contain everything from pesticides to old salt deposits, mold, disease, weeds and even the eggs of insects. Scrub your containers with a plastic brush to make sure everything has been cleaned before using. Simply rinsing it out with water will not do the trick.

2. Soil

Your container garden is only as good as your soil. Good soil = good plants. Don't rely on how dark the soil is to tell you if it is worthy of your plants. If the soil doesn't have the right balance of the right ingredients, it will not offer your plants the nutritional value they need to succeed.

But you also have to consider space. When a plant is in the ground, their roots can travel as far as they need to in order to obtain what they need from the soil. But container plants are confined to the space of the container. If they can't find it in such cramped conditions, they don't get it. That's why the size of the container, not just the quality of your dirt, is everything.

The choices of soil mixtures available from your local gardening center are almost as dizzying as the choices of containers. In order to make the best choice for your plant's needs, you need to first

understand what it is that your current soil has and what it doesn't have.

Healthy soil is rich in minerals, giving it the right structure, composition and balance to grow healthy, vibrant plants. But another key characteristic of good soil is that it also has enough room for the really important stuff—air and water. Densely packed soil limits the amounts of these two components, which in turn hurts the soil's composition. Good soil is loose and features “pockets” to allow water and air to penetrate to the plant's root system.

But these pockets are also important because they won't impede root growth. In fact, it encourages it, which is exactly what you want. Retaining moisture, allowing “breathability” and offering a multitude of directions for roots to spurt outward is the perfect combination to promote growth.

Right about now, you're probably asking yourself, “don't all potting soils have that?” The answer to that would be an unfortunate “no.” All potting soils are not the same.

Why pH Matters

There is one important component that makes a difference in your soil and that is called “pH.” Although many have probably heard of it from high school science experiments involving litmus paper, this is a very important consideration that has to be factored in. If you want the best options for your plants, you have to consider your soil's pH content.

What is pH? In layman's terms, it means how sweet and sour your soil is. The sweetness is considered its alkaline content, while the sourness is its acid content. A soil's pH is measured on a scale of zero to fourteen. The lower the number, the more acid it contains, the higher the number, the more alkaline it has in it. Naturally, a score of seven is considered neutral.

But it is not that simple. On the pH scale, moving up one whole number has to be multiplied by ten. In other words, rating a seven means the soil contains ten times (not just one) the amount of alkaline as soil rating a six. So moving up or down just one number is a big deal.

Why is this so important to plants? Plants have to have optimal growing conditions in order to flourish. This includes the pH in the soil. If a plant requires a pH of six and your soil has a pH of four, the plant won't reach its full potential. In fact, there is a possibility that it might not hardly grow at all. The pH is that important.

As a general rule, the pH in bagged potting soil is fairly balanced, meaning it is in the six to seven range, which is optimal for most plants, with the exception of a few. If you are relying on dirt from your back yard, it pays to have it tested to make sure it is the right balance.

How do you test dirt? There are multitudes of pH testing kits available where garden supplies are sold. These kits are not only inexpensive, but easy to use as well. Once you know the starting point for your soil, you can determine whether the pH needs to be lowered or raised for your plant's needs.

So if roughly all potting soil is pH balanced, why are they different? Because of their composition. Some soils will have different particles

than others, meaning that it holds water and permits the movement of air more freely.

But there are other concerns, too. One is contamination. Yes, soil can be contaminated with bacteria, which can then transfer to whatever plant you put in the container. It can also contain pesticides from the field that was sprayed to kill the weeds so that the dirt could be harvested.

How do you know if your soil is free of contaminants? You will not. This is where you have to consider the source of the potted soil. If most soil is roughly one price and you find another soil at a drastic reduction, be leery: it might not be good quality.

Another concern is how clean the soil is. Sounds crazy, but soil can be littered with the seeds of weeds. Once you place it in your containers and water it, you are nurturing everything that is packed into the soil—both good and bad. Weeds are far better at growth and spreading than the fruits and vegetables you have planted.

If you want one more way to check bagged soil, check the ingredients list. This gives the components that make up the soil. Some are good and need to be there, while others are just fillers. Do some research and be familiar with which ones you want to include in your purchase.

One final note: take a look at the bag to determine what type of plants the manufacturer recommends using the soil for. Some are better formulated for flowers, while others are best when used with vegetables. Likewise, some formulas are not recommended for specific types of plants at all.

Some people try to cut the expense by adding their own dirt to potting soil. This is not recommended. While you know what is in the potting soil, you have no idea about the content of your dirt. You might be taking clean, fresh potting soil and mixing it with yard dirt contaminated with all sorts of undesirable materials.

3. Tools

Besides dirt, there are a few key items you need to make your container garden a reality.

Gloves: While these aren't necessarily considered mandatory by some,

they are still a good idea. Since you cannot be completely sure what the soil you are putting your hands in contains, it seems like a safe approach.

PH testing kit: A simple test that could mean a world of difference in rewards.

Hand trowel: This is going to be your closest companion. You cannot effectively plant and maintain a container garden easily without a hand trowel.

Watering can: The easier it is to fill and empty onto a plant, the better. But nothing too heavy or hard to maneuver.

Fertilizer: This will be covered in detail later.

Stakes: Some vegetables need a lot of room in order to grow. That means if you don't give them something to latch onto, they'll find something on their own. Chances are it will not be something you want them to be connected with. For plants that really like to run, such as beans, you might want to go with a small trellis.

Tags: It is amazing how soon after planting something in a container that you forget what it is you planted. Plus, if you enjoy a specific variety of vegetable, you'll have a record of what it was so you can be sure to grow it again next year.

Pruning shears: They need to have an adequate, sharp blade and a comfortable grip since you could be using them quite extensively once your garden begins to really take off.

Extra potting soil: It is common for soil to start settling to an extent after some time. Watering will compact the soil, dropping the level slightly. Plus, there is always the chance of knocking over or dropping a plant and needing to start over with another container. Having extra soil on hand of the same variety will make accidents less stressful for the plant.

Picking Your Fruits and Veggies

Before you can choose your fruits and vegetables, you have to choose what stage you want to take over the growing process. You can start your container garden from seeds or seedlings. The difference is how much responsibility you are willing to undertake.

Seeds are for those who have the extra time to tend to them from the very beginning. Some people like the thrill of seeing the sprouts emerging from the ground for the first time. But you are also taking the risk they might not sprout at all. For some, this is too risky. If having these plants available makes a huge economic impact on whether or not your family eats, then of course, don't attempt it.

Make sure to check the package of the seeds you are interested in to verify their growing season. The U.S. is divided into growing regions, each one being slightly different from the others as far as when specific seeds can be planted. The recommended period for planting in each region is given right on the seed packet. Following these recommendations allows you the best opportunity for producing a healthy garden.

If you find that the optimal growing season for your region has passed, you can still plant your seeds as long as you accept the risk they might not produce. While these growing seasons are not concrete, they are a very good judge of when the seed distributor believes their product will grow.

Seedlings are the most common way of starting a container garden. The risk has already been taken by someone else and you are now able to get a jump on growing your plants.

How to Choose Seedlings

Choosing healthy seedlings is, of course, the best case scenario, but it isn't always as easy as it sounds. Over time, you will get better at recognizing the good plants from the bad ones, but in the beginning, you are going primarily off looks.

A few distinct ways to spot a healthy seedling:

Color: Green is always best. Try to stay away from seedlings that have brown or yellow patches on them. Sometimes this could be due to poor watering practices by the seller, but usually it is an indication that the plant might not be healthy.

Leaves: You want strong, healthy-looking leaves. If some of the leaves are wilted or not standing up straight, this could also be a sign that the plant is not healthy. Pass on it—just in case.

New growth: In many instances, there will be signs of new growth emerging from the seedling. This is always good news that the plant is ready to produce.

Roots: Take the time to pull some of the seedlings out of their containers. This will tell you two things: (1) how established the root system is, and (2) how healthy the root system is.

What you want to see are plenty of white roots trying to find their way out of the container. What you don't want to see are dark roots or very little roots, which could indicate that the plant is in trouble and could be dying.

Planting

Now that you have your location, all of your supplies and you choices of fruits and vegetables you wish to grow, it is time to put it all together and start the planting process.

1. Start with the containers. Make a final check to ensure that the insides of each container are clean and free of debris. Also, closely inspect them for cracks. You want to find them now before you put them into use. Once you place your soil and plant in them, the increased weight and pressure will find these discrepancies for you.

2. Next, check your soil. This might sound simple, but make sure that you have more than enough for your containers. Leaving plants lying around, even in the shade, while you make a last-minute trip to the store puts them under stress.

3. Check for moisture. Soil needs to have the right consistency of moisture before you use it. While it does not require you to saturate it with water, it does mean is that it needs to contain more moisture than the bone-dry consistency that it presents when it is brought home in the bag. Using soil that is too dry when you plant will be hard to balance after planting. The roots will be feverishly searching the soil for any signs of moisture. Waiting until after it is planted to water it will stress the plant. It will also be much more difficult to balance the moisture level throughout the soil after planting has occurred.

The best approach to moisturizing soil is to place the amount of soil that you need in a bucket. Add a small amount of water to the soil and mix it until it is sufficiently damp. This means that it contains enough moisture that it is wet, but there should not be any patches where the soil is densely packed together because of a high concentration of water. Continue adding a small amount of water to the container until all of the soil is saturated.

4. Prep the plant. If you went with a seedling, your plant will already have a formed ball of soil packed around its root system. It is imperative that you do not try to pull this off. Attempting to do so could easily damage the roots and jeopardize the health of the plant.

Your plant's root ball will also probably contain small round pellets. These pellets are fertilizer the grower has used and are not a reason

for concern.

In order to transplant the seedling, you first need to inspect it. Take a good look at the soil surrounding the root ball. If it is rather dry, you will want to add some moisture to it before planting- even if you have moistened your soil in the container.

Place the seedling in a small container of water and allow it to absorb some of the water into the root ball. It doesn't need to float in water or the soil surrounding the root ball will begin to loosen and break apart.

5. Move the plant. Once the seedling's root ball has received a sufficient amount of water, it can be transplanted into the new container. If the seedling's soil was sufficiently wet, then all that is necessary now is to transplant it from its original container to the new one. Since these seedlings are very delicate, it is important that you take your time when removing them from their old container.

Even though most seedlings will be small, it is common for some people to simply pull them out of their old container. This is the wrong thing to do. Pulling on the trunk of the seedling will cause it to snap in two or, at the very least, crack the trunk of the plant, which could eventually kill it.

The preferred method of removal is to place the seedling's trunk between the second and third fingers of one hand and turn the container upside down. Grasp the bottom of the container with your free hand and gently shake it to loosen the seedling from its container. In some instances, the plant may be lodged in tightly, so it might become necessary to tap the bottom in order to move it.

It is possible the plant will still resist moving from the old container. If this occurs, take a butter knife and slide it around the inside of the container on all sides between it and the plant. This should free the seedling.

6. Inspect the root ball. Depending on how long the plant has been allowed to grow in its old container, it is possible that it has established quite an elaborate root system. In fact, there are times when you remove a plant and all you will see is a twisted heap of roots with no visible soil. This means that the plant was allowed to remain in its container for far too long. While the plant can still be used, it will need some additional help in order to get started.

When roots are densely-packed together, you will need to separate and loosen them somewhat in order to allow them to get a head-start once they are placed in the new container.

If you leave them in a mangled mess, the plant will probably still grow, but it will take longer for the roots to realize that they are no longer constricted in a small place. Helping them out speeds up the process.

You will want to gently loosen the roots of the seedling by pulling them apart. Stay away from the base of the plant as you can easily pull roots off the plant base, injuring the plant. Pry the roots apart as much as you can and then plant.

If you see that the root ball is densely packed with soil, you can also help this situation by taking your butter knife and making some small incisions in different places in the soil to loosen it up. The marks do not have to be deep and several small ones are much better for the plant than one or two large ones. Digging into the root ball too deep with a knife can damage roots deep down that you will not be able to see.

7. Plant your plants. Your new container should be filled with soil up to approximately one to one-and-half inches from the outer rim. Take your trowel or even your hand and remove a small amount of soil from the middle. Now, place the plant in the hole and pack the soil back around the plant while holding it upright.

You have to be very careful when packing soil around the plant as several things can happen. First, you may have a tendency to push too hard around the plant in an attempt to firmly seat it in the dirt. In doing so, you can very snap off the plant at the ground or just below it. If you find that the plant isn't firm in the soil, gently remove the soil and the plant and dig a slightly larger hole and try again. Never try to force the plant into the ground.

Second, is that you can end up with a plant that is buried too deep. You want the root system to be submerged, but not part of the trunk of the plant. Judge how high the soil needs to cover the plant.

Make sure that the plant is sitting straight so that there is less likely of a chance that it will tip over or grow at an angle. As it begins to produce vegetables, the added weight on one side could jeopardize the stability of the entire plant.

8. Watering. Surprisingly enough, this involves more than just dumping water on the plant. If water isn't distributed evenly, you take the chance that the plant will not receive valuable water in some parts of the soil. Since the plant has already been put under some stress through transplanting, it does not need the added stress of having to search for water, too.

When you water a new plant for the first time, the water is likely to drain through the soil very quickly since it has just been recently moved into the new container and hasn't had sufficient time to become packed. Even if the soil was moistened before the plant was planted, the soil still needs even more water in order to give the plant the best chance for survival.

If you dump water on the loose soil in the container, chances are very good that the soil will become saturated and the root ball will receive very little of the water. Why would this happen? Because the root ball is denser and the water will be diverted to flow through the easy, loose soil instead.

Instead of flooding the plant with a large volume of water all at once, a better approach is to give the plant a slow, steady drink so that it will allow it enough time to seep into every area—including the roots. This can be accomplished in a number of ways, which will be discussed later in the watering section.

To complete your planting, you will probably have to add a little more soil to the container. When water is applied to the plant, it will automatically compact some of the soil on the surface creating an indentation that needs to be filled. Some people also like to top off the surface surrounding the plant with mulch, sawdust, tree bark particles, landscape fabric or any assortment of other materials. This not only helps to keep precious water from evaporating, but it also serves as a barrier to help discourage the growth of weeds.

It is a good idea to label your plants with tags so you know what varieties of each plant you are growing.

Feeding Your Container Garden

Like everything else, plants have to eat. Since they get their food from the soil around them, you have to make sure that the soil has everything in it the plant needs. This is where fertilizer comes in. But which one do you need?

Once again, you are faced with trying to find just the right fertilizer for your plant's needs. In order to make the best decision, you have to know what it is that you are looking at while reading fertilizer labels.

Anyone who has ever looked at a bag of fertilizer, whether it is for your plants or for your lawn, will see that they come with three numbers. Each of these numbers corresponds with a particular nutrient that is crucial for a plant's growth and overall health. Each number represents the percentage of a specific nutrient in the bag of fertilizer. For example, a 100- pound bag of fertilizer labeled 10-5-10 would contain 10 percent (or 10 pounds) of the first nutrient, 5 percent of the second nutrient and 10 percent of the third. What would the remaining percentage of material be made of? Other nutrients and filler.

The three numbers always correspond to exact nutrients, in the same exact order:

Nutrient #1: Nitrogen. Although over three-quarters of our atmosphere is comprised of nitrogen, it is still needed in the soil in order to ensure good plant growth. But the balance of nitrogen has to be just right. Not enough and the plant suffers, too much and the plant is more susceptible to certain weather conditions.

Nutrient #2: Phosphate. Phosphate takes certain nutrients, including nitrogen, and turns it into food for the plant. Phosphate is also responsible for taking the sun's rays and converting it into food.

Nutrient #3: Potash. Another word for potassium, potash increases the plant's ability to utilize the available water. It also helps the plant to conserve its water supply.

Types of Fertilizer

Besides the combination of these three vital nutrients, fertilizer also comes in one of two major categories: fast release and slow release. As you have probably already deduced, a fast release formula means that the nutrients are available to the plant immediately. This is essential when the plant needs a sudden jolt of nutrients to bring it back to a level of good health.

When using fast-release formulas, you have to remember that, as the name implies, nutrients are going to be bombarding the plant all at once and in a large volume. If you do not plan accordingly, your plant will suddenly perk up and then abruptly die from being over fertilized. In order to compensate for this, you have to be ready to water the plants more than usual so the sudden blast of fertilizer doesn't literally burn the plant up.

Slow release is more for routine fertilization when the plants just needs a constant, but slow and steady feeding of nutrients to keep its levels where they should be.

It is possible, and often practiced, that both slow release and fast release fertilizers can be used together. Again, the presence of fast release fertilizer is going to extract more moisture out of the soil than the plant is accustomed to so excess water will still need to be applied in order to maintain a healthy plant.

Water Is Also Important

As with every other living creature on the planet, container plants not only need water, they need a lot of it. Since they are confined to the smaller growing space of a container, it means that there is a limited amount of soil from which they can draw their moisture. Being in a container also means the soil dries out much easier and quicker.

If you are not experienced in plants and their growth, it might be surprising for you to know that you can, in fact, water a plant too much. You might be thinking, “How can you water a plant *too* much?” Well, look at it from the plant's point of view: if you are in a container and water is being constantly poured onto you and you are only so thirsty, the excess water is not being used. Allowing it to build up not only floods the plant, but encourages rotting. This is why drainage holes are so essential.

You also have to keep in mind that being confined to a container means that even mild temperature changes, especially heat, affects these plants much more than plants that grow in the ground. Add in a lot of direct sunlight and this process speeds up even faster.

A common problem that beginner container gardeners make is trying to squeeze too many plants into a container. This means that there are now more plants fighting for the same limited water supply.

Some people will overcompensate by giving the plants too much water at one time with the belief that they will have it on hand when they need it. This is especially true if the gardener is going to be away for an extended period of time. Unfortunately, plants can only store so much moisture at a time.

The frequency with which you need to water a container garden depends on many factors. The type of planter being used, the size of the planter, the size of the plants, how long they have been planted, the time of year, etc. Getting into a habit of watering your plants on a regular basis is good, but it cannot be completely dependent upon as a reliable measure. Some days may be hotter than others. One day might have considerably more wind. This is why you are better off to have a system in place to do the deciding for you.

A common approach is to go by how the soil feels. If soil is dry on the

top and down to a certain level, such as up to an inch or so, then the plant needs water. But while this is fairly reliable, it does have the drawback of requiring you to stick your finger down into the dirt every time you need to know. Accurate, but not exactly convenient.

Another method is to choose what is called a self-watering planter. These containers have several openings located around the base a few inches from the bottom. They are watering ports to add water to the plant. As the plant dries out, the roots pull water from the bottom. However, in order to check the level of moisture, you will still need to stick a finger in the port to test the soil.

So how do you create the perfect balance of keeping plants sufficiently hydrated without having to set your timer every few hours to douse them with water? Choose a more practical solution.

There are several convenient, economical and easy ways to make sure your garden gets exact amount of water that it needs.

Water Mats: Known by different names, you lay these mats of porous material on top of the dirt surrounding the plant. When you water the plant, the mat soaks up excess water and stores it. As the plant begins to dry out, water is slowly released from the mat to the plant. To see if the mat's supply of water has been depleted, simply touch it for dryness.

Drip Bulbs or Drip Balls: Known by different names, it still uses the same objective. A bulb or ball is filled with water and inserted into the soil. The bulb/ball releases moisture one drip at a time to maintain a constant, albeit slow, dispensary of water onto the plant. If there are several plants in one container, you just place the bulb/ball in the middle so that all of them are sufficiently reached. When the bulb/ball is empty, refill it.

Drip Irrigation Lines: These are very popular, especially for larger container gardens. But do not let the name fool you; you won't have to invest in an entire irrigation system for your yard to reap the benefits of a drip system.

There are different manufacturers of these systems, but they all serve the same purpose. The "power supply," if you will, is a small timer that attaches to an outdoor water faucet. No adapters are required. It simply screws onto the faucet like a garden hose. On the outgoing port of the timer is a small hose similar to a garden hose, but with one

small difference: it is lined with tiny holes that drip water.

Some variations will provide the hose and allow you to punch your own holes in the appropriate spots. An ice pick will do nicely. Usually, the systems that do not pre-poke the holes for you will provide a small tool to use for making holes. But you have to be very careful making holes so that they are uniform across the garden. You also don't want to deliver too much water to one plant and not enough to another.

Some models of drip irrigation systems go one step further and take the guesswork out of it. They provide the timer and the hose, but instead of leaving the hole punching up to you, they provide small emitters that release the water instead. These emitters have a barbed tip on the bottom and are inserted into the hose at the appropriate spots.

The emitter portion is gaged according to how much water you wish to deliver. Emitters range from a quarter of a gallon per hour to one gallon per hour. If you change plants, you can replace one emitter with another since the barbed tips are the same size. This takes all of the guesswork out of watering and the systems are surprisingly inexpensive for what you get. Plus, the time and aggravation that it automatically saves you is well worth the investment.

What about Pests and Disease?

Besides fruit and vegetables, plants also bring something else to your home—pests and disease. If you are new to gardening, the volume of bug and disease issues that you will be faced with can seem overwhelming. But don't worry. It isn't anything that you won't be able to handle with the right tools and the correct knowledge.

There are several ways to deal with these two unfortunate side effects of container gardening: prevention and treatment.

Prevention

It is always better to eliminate the possibility of problems before they have a chance to present themselves. While this is not always a 100-percent guarantee that you will be disease-free and bug-free, it will certainly go a long way in diminishing the number of problems that you have to deal with.

Rules of prevention:

1. Keep an eye out. Since your containers are isolated from other growth, you should be able to spot pests and disease as soon as they appear. Catching an issue early gives you a much better opportunity of keeping it contained to a small area. When you water your plants, give them a once-over. If you use a self-watering system, get in the habit of inspecting them periodically.

2. Maintain a healthy garden. Plants are much more susceptible to disease when they are sick themselves. Keeping your plants healthy is one of the best preventive measures that you can practice. Keeping your plants well fed, with plenty of good, rich soil, and adequately watered will go far in helping fight off predators.

3. Start with healthy plants. Certain plants are more tolerant of some insects and diseases than others. Do some research to determine which varieties of plants are the hardiest. If you aren't sure when you are shopping for seedlings, ask a store associate. Sometimes, the information is given right on the plant's label.

4. Keep your tools clean. It's common for people to use their yard

tools for more than maintaining their container garden. But moving them from fresh, potted soil to yard dirt can leave them open to picking up a wide range of unhealthy bacteria, fungus, and other nasty things. If you use your tools outside of your container garden, make sure to disinfect them thoroughly before using them again on your plants to avoid any kind of contamination.

Separate the good from the bad. If one plant comes down with a disease, chances are they all will unless you act quickly. Separate a plant at the first sign of trouble to avoid spreading it to others.

Treatment

Once bugs or disease hit, it's time to take action. The first thing people do is to run to their closest garden center and load up on chemicals. But wait! You want to make sure that you are stopping the infestation while limiting the residual damage left behind to the plants and the environment. How do you do that? Research.

In order to effectively deal with something, you have to know exactly what it is that you are being forced to deal with. Unless you are an expert in plant diseases and pests, you probably will not know what it is. Trying to describe a particular bug in detail or exactly what a specific kind of fungus or blight looks like to a garden associate might not be accurate enough. You need proof.

If you can, capture one of the bugs or pull off an infected leaf and take it with you for identification. If you can't or don't want to, get your hands on a pest, write down exactly what it looks like including shape, size, color, any distinguishing marks, if it flies, crawls fast, has long antennae, etc. And if that seems like too much work, take a picture or video using your cell phone. Now, your sales associate will know exactly what to give you to fight it.

If you are given a pesticide, make sure of a few details before purchasing. First, is it specifically designed for just this one problem or a host of problems? Many pesticides are designed to kill everything that moves. While this might sound reasonable to a gardener who is closely guarding their container garden, it also means that even good insects are being eradicated. This is not advisable.

There are pesticides that are only geared for specific pests. Going with these are always the best option.

Your second concern is its staying power. Does it quickly dissipate or does it linger on the plant, and in the soil, for some time? If it hangs around, this means that a good rain will wash it out into the yard and who knows where else. If the pests are on your plant, you do not want pesticide flooding your yard.

Believe it or not, some pests have their own traps named after them. Trapping them is a logical choice over using poison and is less messy.

Remember that anytime you use pesticides of any kind, you have to protect yourself. This means everything from wearing long sleeves and safety goggles to protective gloves—even when handling the containers.

Also, make sure not to try to use a chemical when there is even the slightest of wind since it will blow fumes or pesticide everywhere around you—including on you. And check the weather before you apply to ensure that a torrential downpour won't wash away your effort right after you apply it.

If you come across old pesticide, never pour it down the drain or even out into the woods. It will eventually creep its way back into your surrounding groundwater. Instead, call your county and ask for directions on how it should be disposed of. You can also call the manufacturer on the label and they can advise you on how to safely dispose of it.

For those who wish to protect their plants while still keeping things healthy, there are natural alternatives. A little research will provide you with a list of natural, organic, and chemical-free alternatives that are proven to be effective while leaving the environment unscathed. Some of these might involve mixing certain commonly found household ingredients, but it's still better than putting out poison if it isn't necessary.

Conclusion

So there you have it. Everything you need to know to get started with your own private container garden. Although the concept can seem daunting at first, you will be amazed at how much you get into the process and how much fun you can have with it.

Once you begin container gardening, you will be hooked on the concept for good. You will not only be able to brag to your friends and family about what you have accomplished, but you will have the peace of mind in knowing exactly where your food came from and what it was subjected to. How many of your friends and family members can say that with assurance?

Chances are you will end up growing more food than you can consume. This means sharing it with others or, if you prefer, selling it on the side. Either way, it's a good feeling to know that the rewards of your hard work can be shared and enjoyed by others.

Being able to count on a crop of your favorite fruits and vegetables year after year is rewarding in and of itself. But knowing that you not only had a hand in their availability, from concept to harvesting, but that you did it all by yourself really does make the food taste that much better.

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